

**‘The Dictionary of Alternatives – Utopianism to Organisation’**, by Martin Parker, Valérie Fournier and Patrick Reedy, Zed Books (2007), 338pp., £16.99 (soft), £70.00 (hard).

This is more an encyclopaedia than a dictionary and, with multiple contributors, has something of the tone of Wikipedia (which is one of its eclectic range of entries). The theme of the book is contrarian – anti-capitalist, anti-establishment and nonconformist in its widest sense. It seeks to open minds to alternatives to Western capitalism and to sponsor values other than profit. Many entries explore utopian ideas and models in a search for better ways of organising society - for these authors, ‘Utopia’ reflects Ernst Block’s ‘principle of hope’ rather than a ‘brave new world’.

*The Dictionary of Alternatives* is not a book to read from cover to cover. It is too diverse and disparate to build a sustainable line of thought, yet its contents shape a heartfelt critique of Western society and its values, explore historical examples of alternatives and raise a myriad of questions - but no answers. If anything, it is too focussed on Western models at a time when China, India and other civilisations are reasserting themselves. The authors have started a process – perhaps they should open the ‘Dictionary’ to the world and create an ‘anti-Wikipedia’?

Most readers will enjoy this book as a bedside companion, browsing in its Aladdin’s cave of entries to discover new delights and refresh distant memories. The historical content is fascinating and largely accurate, and it is possible to pick a theme (e.g. ‘Dissent’) and range through dozens of entries to build a picture of a powerful process at work. It is interesting to reach back to the origins of Communism, through Marx, Proudhon, the French Revolution and earlier utopias. But although he was a key figure in challenging orthodoxy, Jesus Christ is missing.

The selection of modern entries betrays a penchant for revolution which may disturb some readers. The ‘Battle of Seattle’ comes across as negative, vilifying the WTO and ignoring the benefits which trade liberalisation can bring. Although the WTO process has been damaged, trade liberalisation is steadily reducing world poverty and creating ‘middle classes’ who can improve the governance of emerging countries. It is interesting that there is no entry for ‘Capitalism’ - the authors have spurned the process that creates the wealth needed to fund their utopian ideas

*The Dictionary of Alternatives* invites readers to explore new ideas for shaping society into the future. At a time when governments strive for conformity, and confuse their citizens with ‘spin’ and half-truths, this book opens up disruptive choices and empowers its readers. It also demonstrates how revolutions and utopias have a strong tendency to evolve into dictatorships and dystopias, as the entry on the ‘Soviet Union’ admits and that on ‘Garden Cities’ reveals. Perhaps the only solution is permanent revolution – at least that was what Mao Tse-Tung believed!

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